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SUBJECT: TFLE01: FRENCH PRESIDENCY VIEW: ABSOLUTE

NECESSITY TO REACH AGREEMENT...BUT CONCERN TIME MAY NOT YET
BE RIGHT FOR UNSCR

Classified By: POLITICAL MINISTER COUNSELOR JOSIAH ROSENBLATT FOR REASON 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (S) SUMMARY: Presidential Middle East Advisor Dominique Boche offered a measured and candid take on where we are on Lebanon late August 4. Stressing that Franco-American cooperation on the UNSCR was excellent, Boche said he nevertheless feared that some key differences -- deriving from the opposing needs of the Israelis and Lebanese at this time -- might not yet be bridgeable. Israel, he said, may insist on more time to eradicate Hezbollah from the south, while Hezbollah (and Iran), riding high, would not make it easy for the Lebanese Government to agree a political package and an international stabilization force. That said, we must do everything to reach agreement on a UNSCR as soon as possible: The situation was rapidly deteriorating, risking a dangerous escalation of events that could lead to Lebanon's failure as a state, the spread of the conflict into other parts of the region, and an increased threat to Israel's long term security.

¶2. (S) Boche said Iran had clearly been party to Hezbollah's original provocation. France judged that Tehran was at the core of the problem, and was not yet interested in being a party to a solution; based on its outreach last week (special envoy Cousseran in Tehran and Foreign Minister Douste-Blazy in Beirut), the GOF had concluded that for now at least, the Iranian regime saw no advantage to playing a constructive role. That could change however, depending on the situation on the ground. Syria was not a prime player, he said; Spanish (or German) efforts will not bear fruit. Addressing France's continued refusal to enter detailed discussion of or preparation for an international force, Boche took the familiar position that a political agreement must be achieved -- and the nature of the force's role -- first. END SUMMARY

¶3. (S) Political Minister Counselor met August 4 with Presidential Middle East Advisor, Dominique Boche, to review French thinking on the way forward in Lebanon. (Boche is holding down the fort at the Elysee diplomatic cell during the August holidays; President Chirac returns only in late August, preceded by a few days by Diplomatic Advisor Gourdault-Montagne. Both Chirac and Gourdault-Montagne are of course attending to urgent Lebanon business from their

vacation redouts.) Boche began by emphasizing the need to move as quickly as possible toward a resolution. He was concerned that the Lebanese population -- of all confessions -- was swiftly becoming radicalized, making a settlement more difficult in the short term and putting its integrity at risk over the long run. Hezbollah was gaining support -- or was at least enjoying temporary solidarity -- throughout Lebanon. The vast quantities of displaced persons would inevitably cause interconfessional tensions. A further escalation risked drawing other regional parties into the conflict, thereby risking the destabilization of several already fragile states. Despite the extensive destruction in Lebanon, he said, Hezbollah is currently seen by the Lebanese (and many in the international community) as the triumphant winner of the conflict against Israel. This was certainly Hizbollah's (and Iran's) view. Hezbollah was therefore in no mood to facilitate Lebanese government agreement to a realistic political package and to an international stabilization force. That could change, however, if Hezbollah suffered serious reverses on the ground.

14. (S) Despite close U.S.-French cooperation, negotiations on the UNSCR were progressing slowly, with differences over key points still outstanding. These were not essentially U.S.-French differences. They derived from our respective understandings of what the parties could agree to and could realistically implement, with France more attentive to Lebanese perspectives and the U.S. to Israel's. With this tacit division of sensitivities, but with the same shared understanding of what the traffic would bear on both sides, our missions in New York were doing their best to forge a workable approach. Boche feared, however, that perhaps the time is not yet ripe for agreement. Perhaps necessary convergence will require a change in the situation on the

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ground sufficient to erode the appearance of a victorious Hezbollah, enabling both Israel and Lebanon to acquiesce to a common political package, and permitting the dispatch of stabilization force with a realistic chance of accomplishing its mission. This was his reluctant analysis, however, not French policy: The U.S. and France must continue to do all within our power to reach the earliest possible settlement. If at times it appeared that the US and France differ on certain issues, this can actually be to our advantage in dealing with one or another of the parties.

15. (S) Probed about Iran's role, Boche said that the GOF was convinced Tehran had been behind the kidnapping of the Israeli soldiers on July 12; the timing, coming as the pressure on Iran over its nuclear program was reaching a head, was more than coincidental. There is no question that Iran is a key player, which is why Paris decided to sound out Iranian intentions last week. He said that the GOF had concluded from their meetings with high-level Iranian officials July 31 and August 1 in Tehran and Beirut that for the moment Tehran saw no advantage in facilitating a settlement, and that it remained adamantly opposed to the presence of an international stabilization force in Lebanon. With Hezbollah riding high, with the surge of support for it throughout the region, Tehran would demand terms impossible for Israel to accept: an unconditional cease-fire, an international force deployed only on the Israeli side of the Blue Line, and prisoner exchanges. All of this with no meaningful quid pro quo. This could change, said Boche. If the situation on the ground were to evolve significantly, and to Hizbollah's detriment, Iran might be prepared to play a braking role on Hezbollah. France might, therefore, check in again with Tehran at some time. (That said, clarified Boche, French envoy Jean-Claude Cousseran's visit to Tehran was for now a one-shot exercise.) As to Iran's motivation more generally, Boche said Iran -- even the current regime -- desperately wanted recognition from the West, and the U.S. in particular, as a regional power. While there is something for us to work with here, admittedly those currently in charge in Iran do not now appear to be moving in the

direction of serious dialogue.

¶16. (S) Syria is a completely different story, Boche stressed. It lacks motivation for resolving the crisis -- which diverts attention from a possible Hariri tribunal -- and is in any case not a key actor. It is only a supporting player both in terms of its regional position and its influence on Hizbollah. Reaching out to Syria, as Spain has advocated, would be like negotiating in the Cold War with Poland or Bulgaria rather than the Soviet Union -- a foolish waste of time. Syria's role is now largely limited to that of a transit state. Spanish efforts were ill advised, as they attributed to Damascus an importance it does not merit.

¶17. (S) Concerning a UN-sanctioned stabilization force, Boche insisted that the time was not yet right to address specifics. Hewing to current GOF orthodoxy, he argued that a political agreement must be in place before its mandate or composition could be realistically discussed. That said, he offered that the GOF hoped a force would be multi-sourced, including forces from Turkey, Arab countries, and of course Europe, notably France. A sine qua non would be acceptance by all the parties. France could not agree to the deployment of any force that would be targeted by Hezbollah. Like the U.S., France remembered 1983 only too well. Its mandate, broadly, would be to assist the LAF in stabilizing the southern region of Lebanon and ensuring border security. Admitting that preparation of the force could take some time, Boche referred vaguely to UNIFIL's possible interim role.

¶18. (S) Despite the wear and tear, France's improved relations with Israel, Boche said, continue to hold. Douste-Blazy and Gourdault-Montagne were in regular contact with their Israeli counterparts, and the GOF with Prime Minister Olmert. Israel understood France's position and role, and he noted there was no intention on the part of France, or Israel he thought, to move away from their continued close dialogue. Boche noted that France's Ambassador to Israel, Gerard Araud, would be

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taking up his new duties as MFA Political Director early-to-mid September. (Note: Araud's appointment was warmly greeted by the Israeli Embassy here.)

¶19. (S) Boche closed by returning to the heart of the matter: The strategic goal is the full and final disarmament of Hezbollah. While this may take some time, it can only be reached through as rapid as possible an agreement among the parties, involving compromise for both, on the elements of a UNSCR. Increasingly, the future of Lebanon and the stability of the region depended on our success.

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